

Cowboy Culture: a Saga of Five Centuries

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Book Reviews

illustrated. It throws a good deal of light on a man who, if not in the first rank of American officials of the 1820s, was still a person of considerable importance. Anyone interested in the politics or bureaucratic evolution of the 1820s, or the evolution of our Indian policy will surely find this book very interesting.

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Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries, by David Dary. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981. pp. xii, 384. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$17.95.

David Dary's new book is appropriate for him. A sweeping history of America's cowmen—from Spanish and Mexican vaqueros to Anglo cowboys—this work makes a fine companion to Dary's earlier big one about the bison, *The Buffalo Book* (1974). *Cowboy Culture* is a broad history which touches almost every important aspect of its subject. Avoiding sentimentality, Dary attempts an objective report of the life and times he describes; his is a book packed with graphic detail and telling quotations from a great variety of primary sources. Here are Spanish Californios making sport of roping grizzlies, vaqueros breaking wild three-year-olds with rope and bosal or hackamore (in much the same way a few of the big cow ranches still break their colts—the Pitchforks in Texas and the Bells in New Mexico for example). Here are great figures like the famed priest Father Kino, remembered for his teaching of live-stock husbandry and animal management. Here too is described the birth of roping. In the sixteenth century the vaquero, wielding a vicious desjarretadera or hocking knife bound to a wooden lance, hamstringed cattle from horseback. Because Spanish horsemen destroyed immense herds of cattle on the open range for sport as well as for hides, this practice was outlawed in 1574. Gradually the lasso replaced the hocking knife. In the earliest days, the vaquero rode in behind a wild cow and carried his lasso looped at the end of a lance. Closing on the cow, he slipped the loop to the brute's horns, then tightened gradually in order to slow the cow down and save himself and his horse. There was no saddle horn to tie to. At first, the vaquero, after tying to the cow, made fast the other end of the lasso to the saddle cinch or the horse's tail. Dary presents a couple of sixteenth-century drawings illustrating these precarious practices, ones which made modern rodeo look like a baby's game.

I have some minor complaints about Dary's book. Sometimes his use of terms is questionable. In describing horse breaking, Dary tells of the custom of tying up a hind leg to the shoulder to make a half-wild horse stand to be handled. He calls this practice "side lining" (p. 49). In fact horse breakers and shoers call the practice simply "tying up a foot" or "Scotch hobbling." "Sidelining" is something altogether different. It is a way of hobbling a horse by tying together the front and hind foot on the same side and is normally used, not to break or gentle a green horse, but to prevent a working horse from wandering too far while he is grazing—often during lunch break or overnight on a pack trip. As Ramon F. Adams put it in *Western Words: A Dictionary of the American West* (1968), sidelining was "to prevent" the animal "from traveling at speed" (p. 280). Occasionally a chapter title is misleading. "The Mixing of Cultures" (Chapter Five) for example is really not primarily about that subject. The title of the book itself does not seem to me to be quite appropriate. "Culture" is an immensely complicated term, one that has been used so often to mean so many different things that it has consequently become practically meaningless. Dary himself does not succeed in clearly defining what he means by cowboy "culture" in his book's foreword although when he writes of the book's being a "combination of history and the cultural aspects, especially the tools and techniques of the cowboy" (p. xii), he is very close to describing what his work is in fact.

Over all, David Dary can be proud of his achievement. *Cowboy Culture* covers an immense sweep of time and space, of techniques, skills, and styles. It emphasizes the growth and change in the methods of cow handling and cowboy horsemanship over the centuries instead of picturing the cowboy as a fixed and heroic figure. Dary treats the historical working cowmen of the ages rather than the mythical and imagined ones of popular literature, the movies, and television. The book contains an excellent selected bibliography for people who wish to read more on the subject. Best of all, it pulls together and builds upon a great number of widely scattered primary sources. The book synthesizes and narrates. It tells the story. Thus *Cowboy Culture* belongs in the personal libraries of all those buffs of the cow range and the long trail who would see the large picture. Especially it belongs in the libraries of those readers who are addicted to the many romantic and mythical fictions about the cowboy and his West.

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